

I own a small veterinary practice in a small town in Wyoming. The smallness and isolation of the town means I have to be willing to treat anything that walks, crawls or slithers in the door.

The winters are long and brutal.

Exposition detail It had been snowing hard since dawn. I looked past Mrs. Barney, through the window at the relentless falling snow, only half hearing her. I was worried about not being able to make it home that evening and wondering if I should order a pizza while there was still time. Gayle Barney's frustration brought me back to the problem at hand. "But it was my dog!" she cried. She couldn't understand why I didn't agree with her, and having to repeat myself was getting irritating. I tried again.

"Look, Mrs. Barney. Dogs just don't live that long. Some make it to sixteen, a few to eighteen. I have one client with a dog that's nearly twenty, but no dog lives to be thirty-eight."

Complication In response, she told me the story again. "I was filling up at that Gas-N-Eat on the interstate and I heard a dog barking. I looked over and saw him in a pickup that was parked in front of the diner. He was calling to me. I went over and I KNEW it was him. It was Sparky. And he remembered me. He looked right at me. I said, 'Sparky, is that you?' and he nearly jumped out of the truck. Then this guy inside the diner tapped on the glass with his fork and waved at me to get away from the truck." She looked at me expectantly.

"But Mrs. Barney, you said Sparky died fifteen years ago and he was old..." She had been shaking her head vigorously and finally interrupted.

"No, no, no. I said my husband took him out to shoot him. We were getting divorced so I figure the bastard just turned Sparky loose for the coyotes to kill. But he made it to safety. He must have."

I tried again. "But if that were so, Sparky would be over twenty years old now and dogs simply don't live that long."

She was still shaking her head. "I read about a dog that lived to be thirty-eight years old. So Sparky could still be alive. And I know it was him. He looked right at me like he remembered me. It was my dog."

I was getting nowhere, and the more I argued, the more agitated she became. She would not believe that the dog she saw at the Gas-N-Go wasn't her long lost Sparky. To end it I said, "Well if you're so sure it was Sparky, then why not call the sheriff's office?"

She hugged her arms to her chest, shaking her head so hard her entire body torqued from side to side. "They won't believe me. They never believe me." Then she stormed out, crying and muttering, "My dog, my dog," as she headed to her truck.

I made it home through the snowstorm, glad the day was over. My wife and I sat in front of the TV, with me relating the day's events and Elaine dividing her attention between me and the news. I was telling her about a constipated parrot when she interrupted with a gesture toward the TV. A pickup had slid off the interstate and gone over a forty-foot cliff. Amateur video showed the battered vehicle lying upside-down, surrounded by debris half hidden in the snow. This was the second time in two weeks that someone had died at that spot. In the first event, a loaded semi trailer rammed through the rail and went over the edge. The winter weather had prevented any attempt to repair the broken rail. This time there was nothing to stop that truck from ending up at the bottom of the cliff.

The sheriff was being interviewed. "The victim left the restaurant without paying. In fact, he ran out without eating his meal. We found where he went into the gully. The tracks in the snow showed he had tried to get around another vehicle. The other vehicle swerved, probably due to ice on the road, and pushed the victim's car toward the edge. The other driver did not stop, but in this blizzard it is likely he never realized he had hit someone." Elaine commented sadly on the tragedy but I made a bad joke about the just desserts of not paying for one's meal.

By morning the storm had ended, leaving the town covered with a foot of new snow. I made it to the clinic in time for my morning appointments. The first patient, according to the chart on the door, was a new visitor in for a routine physical. I walked into the examination room and was greeted by the happiest animal I'd seen in a long while. A Shih-Tsu was standing on the exam table. His tail was wagging excitedly and he couldn't stop panting. He had bushy eyebrows and ridiculously long, fu-manchu style whiskers. Even at a distance I could see the perfectly white teeth of a young dog. His wide, dark eyes stared unblinking, begging me to pet him. I scratched his ear and glanced at the chart. Owner: Gayle Barney. Then I noticed her sitting in the corner, legs crossed, hands folded primly on her lap.

Mrs. Barney looked up at me with a light smile and said, "My dog."

Ends in a climax.